

MARCH 30 1967

Oldsters Upset Over Big Question:
Is Pickup Cowboy Really A Worker?

By Monte Noelke

MERTZON — At last our 163-day dry spell has ended. On March 19, shortly before midnight, a chain of thunder clouds dumped up to .8 of an inch of moisture on the Shortgrass Country. Almost immediately, the scene changed. In 24 hours the waste-away bushes and the soil- brush was blossoming into a splendor of lush greenery.

Once again the lame and the crippled were able to walk upright. December calves which had never heard thunder were wet to their hocklines; 45-day old lambs that had never seen the sun shaded were drenched to their backbones. On the domestic front, peace returned. The overall percentage of knock-down and dragouts fell a full seven points.

But for the first time in our local history the older men seemed to be least affected by the bountiful moisture. Members of the age group ranging from solid mouths to gummers appeared to be still under the gloom of the long dry spell. The oldtimers apparently were unconvinced that one rain would heal all that was amiss on the rangelands. However, judging from what I could overhear, the main source of their pessimism is the stir over the 1966 amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The old grumblers have made up their minds that to include agriculture workers under minimum wages means the fall of ranchdom.

The most notorious critics of the Act are going so far as to claim that the day is near when a two-bushel trowsack won't hold all the carbon paper it takes to run a ranch. According to their reasoning, a man won't be able to have his wife change the pillow slip on his bed without first marching her by a time clock.

Some of the worst pessimists predict that by the time the Labor Department has jurisdiction men to 78-year-old sheep shearers, a rancher won't have any more control over his working force than a sheep dog has over the future market on flea powder.

The main reason these old squabblers are so torn up rests in the uncertainty of how to classify their present workers. Neither the Department of Labor nor any of the various ranch organizations knows what category the so-called pickup cowboys belong to.

At the time of this writing it is unclear where to place a man who thinks saddling a horse to ride a couple of miles is worse than catching eight of the most 10 dreaded diseases. No one knows whether he should be designated as a patron of the petroleum and automotive industry, or allowed to be thrown in with the rest of the agricultural working force.

As it is, the wailing and moaning on the ranchlands and in the coffee houses sound worse than a busy Saturday at the slave market in Old Baghdad. In her long tenure of settling all the woes of mankind, it's doubtful if Miss Abigail Van Buren has ever heard such pitiful pleas for mercy.

All hope is not lost, however. The rain has come; grass is more than 1/2-inch high in the low spots. Perhaps we will get a follow-up rain in June that will calm the fears of the oldtimers.